

LECTURE 9. The development of the English realistic novel

Plan

- 1 Henry Fielding. His life and work. “Tom Jones”.
- 2 The Sentimentalists. Robert Burns. His life and lyrics.

Robert Burns

Robert Burns was born in 1759, in Alloway, Scotland, to William and Agnes Brown Burnes. Like his father, Burns was a tenant farmer. However, toward the end of his life he became an excise collector in Dumfries, where he died in 1796; throughout his life he was also a practicing poet. His poetry recorded and celebrated aspects of farm life, regional experience, traditional culture, class culture and distinctions, and religious practice. He is considered the national poet of Scotland. Although he did not set out to achieve that designation, he clearly and repeatedly expressed his wish to be called a Scots bard, to extol his native land in poetry and song, as he does in “The Answer”:

*Ev'n thena wish (I mind its power)
A wish, that to my latest hour
Shall strongly heave my breast;
That I for poor auld Scotland's sake
Some useful plan, or book could make,
Or sing a sang at least.*

And perhaps he had an intimation that his “wish” had some basis in reality when he described his Edinburgh reception in a letter of December 7, 1786 to his friend Gavin Hamilton: “I am in a fair way of becoming as eminent as Thomas a Kempis or John Bunyan; and you may expect henceforth to see my birthday inserted among the wonderful events, in the Poor Robin’s and Aberdeen Almanacks. ... and by all probability I shall soon be the tenth Worthy, and the eighth Wise Man, of the world.”

That he is considered Scotland’s national poet today owes much to his position as the culmination of the Scottish literary tradition, a tradition stretching back to the court *makars*, to Robert Henryson and William Dunbar, to the 17th-century vernacular writers from James VI of Scotland to William Hamilton of Gilbertfield, to early 18th-century forerunners such as Allan Ramsay and Robert Fergusson. Burns is often seen as the end of that literary line both because his brilliance and achievement could not be equaled and, more particularly, because the Scots vernacular in which he wrote some of his celebrated works was—even as he used it—becoming less and less intelligible to the majority of readers, who were already well-versed with English culture and language. The shift toward English cultural and linguistic hegemony had begun in 1603

with the Union of the Crowns when James VI of Scotland became James I of Great Britain; it had continued in 1707 with the merging of the Scottish and English Parliaments in London; and it was virtually a *fait accompli* by Burns's day save for pockets of regional culture and dialect. Thus, one might say that Burns remains the national poet of Scotland because Scottish literature ceased with him, thereafter yielding poetry in English or in Anglo-Scots or in imitations of Burns.

Burns, however, has been viewed alternately as the beginning of another literary tradition: he is often called a pre-Romantic poet for his sensitivity to nature, his high valuation of feeling and emotion, his spontaneity, his fierce stance for freedom and against authority, his individualism, and his antiquarian interest in old songs and legends. The many backward glances of Romantic poets to Burns, as well as their critical comments and pilgrimages to the locales of Burns's life and work, suggest the validity of connecting Burns with that pervasive European cultural movement of the late 18th and early 19th centuries which shared with him a concern for creating a better world and for cultural renovation.

Nonetheless, the very qualities which seem to link Burns to the Romantics were logical responses to the 18th-century Scotland into which he was born. And his humble, agricultural background made him in some ways a spokesperson for every Scot, especially the poor and disenfranchised. He was aware of humanity's unequal condition and wrote of it and of his hope for a better world of equality throughout his life in epistle, poem, and song—perhaps most eloquently in the recurring comparison of rich and poor in the song "For A' That and A' That," which resoundingly affirms the humanity of the honest, hard-working, poor, man: "The Honest man, though e'er sae poor, / Is king o' men for a' that."

Burns is an important and complex literary personage for several reasons: his place in the Scottish literary tradition, his pre-Romantic proclivities, his position as a human being from the less-privileged classes imaging a better world. To these may be added his particular artistry, especially his ability to create encapsulating and synthesizing lines, phrases, and stanzas which continue to speak to and sum up the human condition. His recurring and poignant hymns to relationships are illustrative, as in the lines from the song beginning "Ae fond Kiss":

Had	we	never	lov'd	sae	kindly,
Had	we	never	lov'd	sae	blindly!
Never		met—or		never	parted,
We had ne'er been broken-hearted.					

The Scotland in which Burns lived was a country in transition, sometimes in

contradiction, on several fronts. The political scene was in flux, the result of the 1603 and 1707 unions which had stripped Scotland of its autonomy and finally all but muzzled the Scottish voice, as decisions and directives issued from London rather than from Edinburgh. A sense of loss led to questions and sometimes to actions, as in the Jacobite rebellions early in the 18th century. Was there a national identity? Should aspects of Scottish uniqueness be collected and enshrined? Should Scotland move ahead, adopting English manners, language, and cultural forms? No single answer was given to any of these questions. But change was afoot: Scots moved closer to an English norm, particularly as it was used by those in the professions, religion, and elite circles; “think in English, feel in Scots” seems to have been a widespread practice, which limited the communicative role, as well as the intelligibility, of Scots. For a time, however, remnants of the Scots dialect met with approbation among certain circles. A loose-knit movement to preserve evidences of Scottish culture embraced products that had the stamp of Scotland upon them, lauding Burns as a poet from the soil; assembling, editing, and collecting Scottish ballads and songs; sometimes accepting James Macpherson’s Ossianic offerings; and lauding poetic Jacobitism. This movement was both nationalistic and antiquarian, recognizing Scottish identity through the past and thereby implicitly accepting contemporary assimilation.

Perhaps the most extraordinary transition occurring between 1780 and 1830 was the economic shift from agriculture to industry that radically altered social arrangements and increased social inequities. While industrialization finished the job agricultural changes had set the transition in motion earlier in the 18th century. Agriculture in Scotland had typically followed a widespread European form known as runrig, wherein groups of farmers rented and worked a piece of land which was periodically re-subdivided to insure diachronic if not synchronic equity. Livestock was removed to the hills for grazing during the growing season since there were no enclosures. A subsistence arrangement, this form of agriculture dictated settlement patterns and life possibilities and was linked inextricably to the ebb and flow and unpredictable vicissitudes of the seasons. The agricultural revolution of the 18th century introduced new crops, such as sown grasses and turnips, which made wintering over of animals profitable; advocated enclosing fields to keep livestock out; developed new equipment—in particular the iron plow—and improved soil preparation; and generally suggested economies of scale. Large landowners, seeing profit in making “improvements,” displaced runrig practices and their adherents, broadening the social and economic gap between landowner and former tenant; the latter frequently became a farm worker. Haves and have-nots became more clearly delineated; “improvements” depended on capital and access to descriptive literature. Many small tenant farmers foundered during the transition, including both Burnes and his father.

Along with the gradual change in agriculture and shift to industry there was a concomitant shift from rural to urban spheres of influence. The move from Scots to

greater reliance on English was accelerated by the availability of cheap print made possible by the Industrial Revolution. Print became the medium of choice, lessening the power of oral culture's artistic forms and aesthetic structures; print, a visual medium, fostered linear structures and perceptual frameworks, replacing in part the circular patterns and preferences of the oral world.

Two forces, however, served to keep change from being a genuine revolution and made it more nearly a transformation by fits and starts: the Presbyterian church and traditional culture. Presbyterianism was established as the Kirk of Scotland in 1668. Although fostering education, the printed word, and, implicitly, English for specific religious ends, and thus seeming to support change, religion was largely a force for constraint and uniformity. Religion was aided but simultaneously undermined by traditional culture, the inherited ways of living, perceiving, and creating. Traditional culture was conservative, preferring the old ways—agricultural subsistence or near subsistence patterns and oral forms of information and artistry conveyed in customs, songs, and stories. But if both religion and traditional culture worked to maintain the status quo, traditional culture was finally more flexible: as inherited, largely oral knowledge and art always adapting to fit the times, traditional culture was less rigid. It was diverse and it celebrated freedom.

Scotland's upheavals were in many ways Burns's upheavals as well: he embraced cultural nationalism to celebrate Scotland in poem and song; he struggled as a tenant farmer without the requisite capital and know-how in the age of "improvement"; he combined the oral world of his childhood and region with the education his father arranged through an "adventure school"; he accepted, but resented, the moral judgments of the Kirk against himself and friends such as Gavin Hamilton; he knew the religious controversies which pitted moderate against conservative on matters of church control and belief; he reveled in traditional culture's balladry, song, proverbs, and customs. He was a man of his time, and his success as poet, songwriter, and human being owes much to the way he responded to the world around him. Some have called him *the* typical Scot, Everyman.

Burns began his career as a local poet writing for a local, known audience to whom he looked for immediate response, as do all artists in a traditional context. He wrote on topics of appeal both to himself and to his artistic constituency, often in a wonderfully appealing conversational style.

Burns's early life was spent in the southwest of Scotland, where his father worked as an estate gardener in Alloway, near Ayr. Subsequently William Burnes leased successively two farms in the region, Mount Oliphant nearby and Lochlie near Tarbolton. Between 1765 and 1768 Burns attended an "adventure" school established by his father and several neighbors with John Murdock as teacher, and in 1775 he

attended a mathematics school in Kirkoswald. These formal and more or less institutionalized bouts of education were extended at home under the tutelage of his father. Burns was identified as odd because he always carried a book; a countrywoman in Dunscore, who had seen Burns riding slowly among the hills reading, once remarked, “That’s surely no a good man, for he has aye a book in his hand!” The woman no doubt assumed an oral norm, the medium of traditional culture.

Life on a pre-or semi-improved farm was backbreaking and frequently heartbreaking, since bad weather might wipe out a year’s effort. Bad seed would not prosper even in the best-prepared soil. Rain and damp, though necessary for crop growth, were often “too much of a good thing.” Burns grew up knowing the vagaries of farming and understanding full well both mental preparation and long days of physical labor. His father had married late and was thus older than many men with a household of children; he was also less physically resilient and less able to endure the tenant farmer’s lot. Bad seed and rising rents at various times spelled failure to his ventures. At the time of his approaching death and a disastrous end to the Lochlie lease, Burns and his brother secretly leased Mossgiel Farm near Mauchline. Burns was 25.

The death of his father, the family’s patriarchal force for constraint in religion, education, and morality, freed Burns. He quickly became recognized as a rhymer, sometimes signing himself after the farm as Rab Mossgiel. The midwife’s prophecy at his birth—that he would be much attracted to the lasses—became a reality; in 1785 he fathered a daughter by Betty Paton, and in 1786 had twins by Jean Armour. His fornications and his thoughts about the Kirk, made public, opened him to church censure, which he bore but little accepted. It was almost as though the floodgates had burst: his poetic output between 1784 and 1786 includes many of those works on which his reputation stands—epistles, satires, manners-painting, and songs—many of which he circulated in the manner of the times: in manuscript or by reading aloud. Many works of this period, judiciously chosen to appeal to a wider audience, appeared in the first formal publication of his work, *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*, printed in Kilmarnock in 1786 and paid for by subscriptions.

The Kilmarnock edition might be seen as the result of two years or so of riotous living: much conviviality, much socializing with women in an era before birth control, much thinking about humanity without the “correcting” restraint of the paterfamilias, much poetry and song ostensibly about the immediate environment but encapsulating aspects of the human condition. All of this was certainly more interesting than the agricultural round, which offered a physical constraint to match the moral and mental constraint of religion. Both forms of constraint impeded the delight in life that many of Burns’s finest works exhibit. Furthermore, he was in serious trouble with the Armour family, who destroyed a written and acceptable, if a bit unorthodox, marriage contract. He resolved to get out of town quickly and to leave behind something to prove his worth. He seems to have made plans to immigrate to the West Indies, and he brought

to fruition his plan to publish some of his already well-received works. One of the 612 copies reached Edinburgh and was perceived to have merit. Informed of this casual endorsement, Burns abandoned his plans for immigration—if they had ever been serious—and left instead for Edinburgh.

The Kilmarnock edition shows Burns's penchant for self-presentation and his ability to choose variable poses to fit the expectations of the intended receiver. Burns presents himself as an untutored rhymist, who wrote to counteract life's woes; he feigns anxiety over the reception of his poems; he pays tribute to the genius of the Scots poets Ramsay and Fergusson; and he requests the reader's indulgence. In large measure, the material belies the tentativeness of the preface, revealing a poet aware of his literary tradition, capable of building on it, and deft in using a variety of voices—from "couthie" and colloquial, through sentimental and tender, to satiric and pointed. But the book also contains evidence of Burns as local poet, turning life to verse in slight, spur-of-the-moment pieces, occasional rhymes made on local personages, often to the gratification of their enemies. The Kilmarnock edition, however, is more revealing for its illustration of his place in a literary tradition: "The Cotter's Saturday Night," for example, echoes Fergusson's "The Farmer's Ingle" (1773); "The Holy Fair" is part of a long tradition of peasant brawls, drawing on a verse form, the Chrystis Kirk stanza, known by the name of a representative poem attributed to James I:

"Chrystis Kirk of the Grene." Many of Burns's poems and verse epistles employ the six-line stanza, derived from the medieval tail-rhyme stanza which was used in Scotland by Sir David Lindsay in *Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis* (1602) but was probably seen by Burns in James Watson's *Choice Collection* (1706-1711) in works by Hamilton of Gilbertfield and Robert Sempill of Beltrees; Sempill's "The Life and Death of Habbie Simpson" gave the form its accepted name, Standard Habbie. Quotations from and allusions to English literary figures and their works appear throughout his work: Thomas Gray in "The Cotter's Saturday Night," Alexander Pope in "Holy Willie's Prayer," John Milton in "Address to the Deil."

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